

A COMPLETE STORY EVERY SATURDAY

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FICTION SECTION

THREE SECTIONS.

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SECTION TWO.

ONCE A FLIRT

By LUCIAN CARY

Illustrated by WILL B. JOHNSTONE

A Swinging Tale of How a Young Husband Treated His Coquetting Spouse to a Surprise and Got One Himself

CHARACTERS IN THE STORY.

JOHN PALMER, uncommonly-endowed with a sense of duty to protect women—big, powerful, slow to anger, but a caveman when roused.

MABEL PALMER, his wife, who had, of all the village maidens, most constantly assumed a "come and take me—if you can" air, and held it after marriage.

HARVEY WOODS, village gossip, whose philosophy changes with shifting conditions.

ARTHUR MILLINGHAM, who wouldn't take a dare to dine and dance with a pretty young married woman.

MR. DURBROW, Mabel's father, whose forte is frankness, and who doesn't hesitate to advise it to his son-in-law.

MAIZIE BLAZE, a friend of Mabel's, who took John's part in the quarrel—and Mabel's too.

JOHN PALMER had been brought up to take the protective attitude toward the women. Most of us are brought up to take this attitude. But John Palmer had a deeper sense than is common of the duty of men to protect and to guard.

He married a girl of whom it was often said—by her very best friends, too—that she certainly needed a guardian.

Mabel was a slim person with a slightly turned-up nose and an air. Most of the younger crowd in Scarborough had tried one time or another to analyze that air of Mabel's, and most of them ended by saying, "Well, anyway, she's a born flirt." Maizie Blaze, who knew Mabel better than anybody else, said that this air of Mabel's meant: "Come and take me—if you can."

Of course no girl, not even Mabel, could wear such an air all the time. It got its effect partly because she used it so little. She was capable of the nicest sort of friendship. She could be simple and honest and agreeable. Indeed, it was that, the unflirtatious side of her, that made her such a flirt. She didn't pretend to be interested when a young man got to the point of telling her all about his ambitions; she was interested, she was positively maternal. But the young men who told Mabel their ambitions, and that included all the young men she ever knew for more than three days, got a kind of shock. The shock came when Mabel—who had been all interest and all sympathy and so very much there—suddenly became elusive. All she did was to assume that "Come and take me—if you can" air of hers.

Some of them were so surprised that they never actually proposed to her. Some of them were so outraged that they never could forgive her, even when they saw her doing it to somebody else.

John Palmer was a big man, one of those big, powerful men who are slow to anger—the kind of man who can get aboard the subway at Brooklyn Bridge in the rush hour without stepping on anybody and without getting mad. He had played guard for three years at Harvard and won a place on the All-American his last year. He had been in love with Mabel Durbrow ever since he could remember. But only at a distance. He had observed Mabel from afar and quietly decided that he would never let himself be any more in love with her than he was. It wasn't safe. He avoided her—conscientiously.

So one night he found himself talking to her alone, on the veranda, at the Country Club's spring dance. He had talked to her for an hour, while

she cut one dance after another. It had been exactly as if they were old friends who hadn't seen each other for years and now discovered that they liked each other as well as they had formerly, and perhaps better. John had asked if he might call. Or she

had asked him to call. Or they had taken it for granted that he would call.

However that was, he began to see her more and more frequently—to play golf with her through long summer afternoons and to dance with her through short summer evenings and to

walk with her through the mellow summer moonlight.

One day, when all Scarborough was waiting breathlessly for the end, John picked up Mabel at the railway station in his car and drove her home.

"Mabel," he said, as he set her down



SHE TRIED TO KICK. BUT JOHN HELD HER TOO TIGHTLY. SHE TRIED TO SCRATCH. BUT JOHN PALMER WALKED UP THE STAIRS WITH HER AS IF SHE HAD BEEN A CHILD.

at her own front gate, "I have something to say to you."

"But I'm in such a hurry, John," she said. She was poised for flight.

"I don't mean now," John said. "I mean this evening."

"But I believe I have an engagement this evening, Mr. Anderson"—She raised her eyebrows expressively. In a flash she had assumed that air of hers. In one breathless instant she ceased to be the friendly, jolly girl John had known and became the person who seemed to say, "Come and take me—if you can."

"So good of you to take me home," she finished, and before John could recover himself she had waved her hand and started up the walk.

For an instant John watched her receding back. Involuntarily he clenched his fists. And then he ran after her. Mabel heard him coming. Mabel gave one quick look over her shoulder and fled. She ran fast; but once started, John Palmer ran faster. He caught her at the top step. He held her tightly in his arms.

"You will, will you?" he said roughly, and kissed her mouth.

"I—I," Mabel gasped. She tried to free herself. John held her closer. Mabel looked at him defiantly.

"You brute!" she said passionately.

"You're going to marry me," he said through his teeth. Mabel looked up at him. And then her head sank on his shoulder and, with a little sigh, she relaxed in his arms.

"You're going to marry me," he repeated.

"Yes," she whispered, so low that he scarcely heard her.

John released her. John raised his hat. With more ease than he had known himself to possess, he bowed to Mabel.

"Until this evening," he said calmly, and walked off. He had walked right past his car, standing at the curb, the engine running, without seeing it or thinking of it. His self-possession wasn't as magnificent as he imagined. But he had won Mabel Durbrow.

They were married in less than a month and went to the Canadian Rockies for their honeymoon, and stayed twice as long as they had planned. When they came back to Scarborough everybody looked at them searchingly and decided that Mabel was quite as much in love with John as he was with her.

"Of course," said Harvey Woods, "it is well known that a reformed flirt makes the most devoted wife."

Other members of the younger crowd were impressed with this piece of wisdom, so much impressed that they repeated it as their own.

The remark became popular, was overdone, lost its savor, was forgotten. About that time the more observing began to raise their eyebrows and exchange glances over the conduct of Mabel Palmer.

"Of course," said Harvey Woods, "once a flirt, always a flirt—look at Mabel Palmer."

Everybody looked; everybody saw; everybody shook his head wisely and repeated what Harvey Woods had said: "Of course, once a flirt"—

II.

BUT if everybody understood what had happened, John Palmer did not. John Palmer did not understand it at all. He didn't know just how he had won Mabel. But he had won her. He knew that. She had been his—completely. And now she wasn't.

She hadn't done anything that he could reasonably complain about—nothing to which he could definitely object.

John Palmer sat in front of the library fire, considering. It was a spring night and the fire was smoldering fitfully against the back-log, a low fire, but one that ate steadily into the heart of the wood. John Palmer's thoughts were like that. . . .

He imagined himself discussing the matter with Mabel. He never had discussed it with Mabel. He never would discuss it with Mabel. But supposing he did? She could hardly deny that she had been flirting with Arthur Millingham. But she could certainly assert that it was nothing. And it probably was nothing. What could he say then? He could say she was attractive—attention—that she was exciting gossip. But was she?

John Palmer went round this circle of thinking about seven times in an hour. And then he realized that it wasn't Mabel's flirting that he objected to so much. It was her attitude toward him. She had come to treat him as if he were a piece of furniture—a mantel, say, to lean on occasionally. But he couldn't very well tell Mabel that. Besides, if she were treating him the way she had treated him when they were first married she wouldn't be flirting with Arthur Millingham. So it was her flirting that he objected to—in a manner of speaking.

John Palmer had gone round this circle about four times when he heard the doorbell ring somewhere in the depths of the house. He sat up suddenly, saw that it was after 10 o'clock and answered the bell himself.

It was Mabel's father. John was considerably surprised to receive a call from Mr. Durbrow at this hour, but he did not betray his surprise. He led the way back to the library and got out some cigars of the kind Mr. Durbrow liked and stirred up the fire. There is nothing like a wood fire to cover an embarrassing moment—unless it is the ritual of lighting a really excellent cigar. . . .

"Where's Mabel?" asked Mr. Durbrow.

The question was a natural one for

Mr. Durbrow knew that John Palmer was a singularly truthful man. He saw clearly that John hadn't the least idea where Mabel was at that moment. He couldn't say where she was, and he wouldn't lie about it, and so he said just that—"Not absolutely."

"John," said Mr. Durbrow firmly. He intended to carry this thing through now that he had started it. "John," Mr. Durbrow repeated more firmly, "I must beg your pardon. You know—well, to be brutally frank"—Mr. Durbrow hesitated. "To be frank," he resumed, "to be quite brutally frank—why, John, we're old friends, aren't we?"

John Palmer nodded and, seizing the tongs, he turned the back-log half round. He did not speak. He just turned the back-log a bit.

Mr. Durbrow saw that John was embarrassed. John Palmer was a singularly honorable man. But he was not a man to whom frankness came easily—as it came to Mr. Durbrow. And slowly, minutely examining his cigar, Mr. Durbrow saw that he would have to encourage John, to show John how to be frank. Mr. Durbrow saw that John had an immense need to be frank. A double need. He needed to be frank with himself, instead of continuing to hide the hurt he had already hid too long. He needed to be frank with Mabel. It

Somehow, in spite of his frankness, they seemed to be talking around the point rather than to it. But how the devil could they do anything else?

"You know, John," said Mr. Durbrow desperately, "I feel that Mabel is—well—almost indiscreet."

John Palmer sat down in his chair close to the fire and reached for the tongs.

"I should hardly go as far as that," he said.

"I should," Mr. Durbrow insisted.

THERE was a long silence, while John poked the fire and Mr. Durbrow puffed his cigar.

"The fact is, John," Mr. Durbrow continued, "The fact is, I believe I'd speak to her about it—if I were you."

"What would you say?"

"I'd be quite frank," said Mr. Durbrow. "I'd speak to her just as frankly as we've been speaking to-night."

"H-m-m-m!" said John.

"I would," said Mr. Durbrow. "I'd be very gentle, of course—sort of light, you know."

"How light?" John asked.

"Why," said Mr. Durbrow testily, "I'd say: 'Look here, my dear, aren't you flirting a bit?' Just like that—lightly but frank."

John shook his head.

"I would," Mr. Durbrow said. "I certainly would."

"You see, Mr. Durbrow," John said slowly, "I'm no Turk. A woman has as much right to her own way after marriage as before. Perhaps more. If Mabel likes to flirt a bit—why that's Mabel's affair. I can't forbid her to flirt. And what good would it do me if I did?"

"H-m-m-m!" said Mr. Durbrow.

Involuntarily, John Palmer clenched his fists.

"I happen to be stronger than Mabel," he said. "But I can't use my physical strength!"

"Of course not," Mr. Durbrow said hastily. "That would be fatal. She would hate you. Besides no man can do that. It isn't done. But you could suggest a preference to her."

John smiled at Mr. Durbrow.

"You mean—suggest a preference for her society?"

"Well, John, after all—you're her husband."

"Yes. That's just why I can't say: 'Mabel, I'd like to have dinner with you myself occasionally.' You see that was the implication when I married her. And if she doesn't choose to dine with me it's just her way of saying that she'd rather dine elsewhere."

Mr. Durbrow frowned more deeply than ever.

"John," he asked, "why couldn't you have a talk with Mabel—just such a frank talk as we've been having—without any reserves on either side?"

John Palmer rose and paced back and forth across the room. Mr. Durbrow saw that he was seriously considering this plan. But he saw also how difficult it was for a sensitive boy like John to face the prospect of absolute frankness, such frankness as he, Mr. Durbrow, had grown used to through long practice of it.

He rose and put his hand on John Palmer's shoulder.

"My boy," he said. "You don't know women. You don't understand women. I do. Women are difficult to manage. But they can't beat frankness. They like to be elusive and evasive. That's their game. But they can't play it if you're frank. Try being frank with Mabel."

"I will try it," said John Palmer. "I'll talk to Mabel to-night."

Mr. Durbrow held out his hand.

"Good!" he said.

They shook hands.

"I know Mabel," Mr. Durbrow said.

"After all, she's my daughter."

"Of course," said John Palmer.

"You can be gentle with her—you must be gentle. But at the same time you can be frank."

"Of course," said John Palmer.

"Just a little frankness," said Mr. Durbrow.

They shook hands again at the door.

III.

JOHAN PALMER sat for a long hour after Mr. Durbrow had gone, sat in front of his fire until long after midnight. He sat there thinking how lovely Mabel



"YOU WILL, WILL YOU?" HE SAID ROUGHLY, AND KISSED HER MOUTH.

a father to ask of a son-in-law. Or it should have been. But John Palmer turned the back-log over for the second time, and Mr. Durbrow examined the wrapper of his cigar, which he had already scrutinized elaborately.

"I'm sorry she isn't at home," John said. "I know she'd be glad to see you."

"H-m-m-m," said Mr. Durbrow.

"I believe she's dining at the Country Club," John continued.

Mr. Durbrow frowned. Mr. Durbrow bit deeply into his cigar.

"Don't you know where she is, John?"

John winced, winced visibly. Mr. Durbrow would have withdrawn that question if he could. He hadn't intended to ask a question so bald. But he had asked it. If he apologized for asking it, he would only make it worse. That is often the trouble when one has said the wrong thing.

"Not absolutely," John said.

was up to Mr. Durbrow to lead the way.

"I'm fond of Mabel," Mr. Durbrow said. "And I—I'm fond of you, John. I want to help you—only I don't know just what to say."

"I know," said John Palmer.

"I hope, John," said Mr. Durbrow, "that you don't mind my discussing everything awfully frankly—this way."

"No," said John. He shifted the back-log a quarter turn. "Not at all."

"I was sure you wouldn't," said Mr. Durbrow.

John Palmer rose and paced back and forth across the room.

Mr. Durbrow rose and paced back and forth the other way.

"John," said Mr. Durbrow.

"Yes," said John.

"Things—you know—things can't go on this way, can they?"

John shook his head.

Mr. Durbrow sat down. Mr. Durbrow knitted his brows in thought.

was—when she wanted to be. He sat there until Mabel came home.

She came and sat on the arm of his chair and rumbled his hair.

He looked up at her. She smiled. He smiled back. He couldn't help smiling at Mabel when she smiled at him. He loved her.

"Where have you been?" he asked, and took her hand in his.

That was what her father had recommended—frankness, with gentleness. He wanted to know where she had been. He wanted to know all about it. Therefore he would ask her, at the same time taking her hand to show that he was asking in a friendly spirit.

Mabel raised her eyebrows expressively.

"What a question!" she said.

She said it lightly; she said it as if it didn't mean anything at all. But it was an obvious evasion. John saw that. That was like a woman. That was like Mabel. But he kept on.

"What a perfectly simple question," he said evenly. He was not angry. He spoke gently. But his words had a sort of edge to them in spite of him. His tone was the tone that expects an answer.

Mabel slipped off the arm of his chair and sat down in the chair opposite him. Mabel stretched her feet out in front of her and leaned her head back luxuriously.

It was as if she were saying: "I am a little bored, but if I must be bored I may as well be comfortable."

"You sound," she said, "so like a perfectly old-fashioned husband. Don't you really think you sound husbandly, John?"

Something stirred in John Palmer: some memory—like the memory of the day he had pursued Mabel to the very door of her father's house and caught her in his arms and held her against her will.

"Would you mind answering my question?" he asked.

Mabel was startled to hear John speak in that tone. Mabel was startled by his tone for the second time in her life. Only once before had John seemed implacable. There was in her this persistent memory of a John who would not be denied; and the memory was akin to fear. The memory gave her a curious thrill. And because she was beginning to be afraid, Mabel yawned. She yawned ostentatiously. She yawned like a lazy and luxurious kitten.

John Palmer rose to his feet, and when he stood up he towered over Mabel. John Palmer spoke, and when he spoke he should have realized that he was not being just frank. He should have realized that he was getting mad.

"Would you mind answering my question?" he repeated.

"Of course not," said Mabel. Her small teeth came together with a click. "I have been dining at the Country Club with Arthur Millingham."

John looked at the clock. "Until after 1 o'clock?" he asked.

Mabel yawned again, yawned more ostentatiously than before and sank a little deeper into her chair.

"We danced, of course," she said.

JOHN PALMER slowly returned to his chair and sat down.

"Don't do it again!" he said.

Mabel sat bolt upright.

"What do you mean?" she asked, and her tone was the tone of battle.

"Precisely what I said."

Mabel stared at him with hard, defiant eyes.

John Palmer stared back at her, his teeth shut.

"Do you really imagine," Mabel asked, "do you really imagine that you can give me orders?"

John Palmer had a sudden violent impulse to slap her. The impulse was so strong that he clenched his hands. It was so strong that for a moment he could not speak.

"You talk like a Turk," Mabel continued. "You talk as if you owned me."

"Why shouldn't I?" he repeated.

"Aren't you my wife?"

His tone was quite calm; it was so calm it should have warned him; it was so calm that it should have warned Mabel. But they were both past warning.

"Why shouldn't I?" he repeated. And this time his tone was not calm.

Mabel was frightened. She had got in deeper than she had intended. But she was not going to admit it. She was not going to give an inch.

"There's just one reason, John," she said. "If you do, I shall go home."

"No," said John Palmer. He rose to his feet. "No. You will not go home."

Mabel slipped out of her chair. In a flash she assumed that old air of hers. In one breathless instant she had ceased to be an angry wife and become the challenging girl—the girl who seemed to say, "Come and take me—if you can."

"So good of you to tell what's what," she said blithely. "But I'm on my way."

She started toward the door. John stood watching her. She could not forbear to take one look over her shoulder. "Goodby," she said, and started out of the door.

John started for her. She ran. John

tude toward women. But he was not an angel.

Ten minutes later, while Mabel sobbed with fury, John gently but irresistibly put her to bed and tucked her in.

The next morning John rose at 8 o'clock, as he always did. He looked at himself in the mirror. He did not look changed. And yet he must have changed. The John Palmer he was accustomed to see in the mirror could not have done what he had done.

While he was bathing and shaving and dressing, John caught glimpses of himself in the mirror. The mirror kept reminding him what an immense body he had, what powerful shoulders, what a thick neck. What a brute he was! What a monster! Had he always been like this man he saw in the mirror—this ape, this gorilla?

He could never have Mabel again. He had lost his right to her—forever. It was all over.

He could not think. He did not dare

remember. For a few seconds she debated whether it had really happened. It couldn't have happened. It must have been a dream. On her shoulder were four broad streaks of purple and green, the bruises left where John Palmer's fingers had pressed into her flesh.

Mabel stroked her bruised shoulder tenderly. The bruises hurt, but she continued to stroke them as if there were some obscure pleasure in the pain. She got up and looked at them in the mirror. They were shocking bruises.

What a brute John was! She would punish him for being such a brute. She could punish him because he loved her. He couldn't have done what he had done if he hadn't loved her.

Mabel wondered if by any chance John was still in his room. It was early, very early for her. He might be. She would like to show him what he had done to her. She slipped softly over to John's door and tried the knob gently, and slowly opened the door so that she could peek into John's room. He was gone. But his bed had been slept in.

Mabel crept into John's room, slipped into John's bed. It was still warm with the warmth of his body. Mabel snuggled into his bed and went to sleep.

TOWARD noon Mabel put on her hat and walked over to Maizie Blaze's house. It would not do to tell Maizie Blaze too much. But she had to tell Maizie Blaze something. She had to talk. And she couldn't wait until John came home. But she took care to tell the parlor maid where she was going, so that John would know where to find her if he should come home before she did.

"What's happened?" Maizie Blaze asked.

"What makes you think anything has happened, Maizie?"

"I can see it in your face."

"John and I have quarrelled," Mabel said simply.

Maizie waited.

"He—he objected to my friendship with Arthur Millingham."

"I should jolly well think he might," Maizie retorted.

Mabel considered.

"I don't care anything about Arthur—not a bit," she said.

"That makes it all the worse," Maizie Blaze said. "John Palmer is about the finest man I know. You've treated him shamefully. You've been a little fool."

Mabel sighed. "I know," she said. "I made an awful mistake."

"It's time you realized it," Maizie Blaze said. "I hope you'll tell John so."

"He's terribly angry," Mabel said.

"It's time he was angry. I've hoped and prayed that he would get angry. I wish he'd spanked you."

Mabel's eyes filled with tears.

"T-t-t-that's j-j-j-ust w-w-what h-h-he d-d-did," she sobbed.

"What?" cried Maizie Blaze.

"He s-s-spanked me."

Maizie looked at Mabel.

"I don't believe it."

Mabel drew back her blouse and exposed the blue and purple streaks on her shoulder.

Maizie Blaze jumped to her feet.

"Why," she cried, "that's the most terrible thing I ever heard of. The brute!"

It was at that moment that John Palmer arrived.

Mabel slipped into the next room.

"Is my wife here?" John Palmer asked.

"Yes," said Maizie Blaze. "But you're not going to see her."

They stood facing each other. John's eyes were dull with pain. Maizie's eyes were bright with anger.

"You insufferable beast!" said Maizie Blaze. "You—you monster!"

John Palmer looked at her miserably. It was true. He was a monster.

"You will never see Mabel again," said Maizie Blaze. "Never!"

Mabel came into the room. Mabel walked straight up to John Palmer and put both arms around his neck.

"John," she said, "please take me home."

John's arms tightened around her. John kissed her. John held her very gently.

Mabel turned and looked over her shoulder at Maizie Blaze.

"Do you think you can separate us?" she asked.

Maizie Blaze watched them go out together. Maizie went to the window and watched them walk down the street close together. Maizie shook her head slowly.

Mr. Durbrow, seeing what was plain for any one to see, spoke casually to John Palmer one evening at the Country Club during one of those brief intervals when he could be seen apart from Mabel.

"Everything all right between you and Mabel?" he asked genially.

"Very much all right," John said.

"I knew it would be if you'd just take my advice," Mr. Durbrow said.

"Just a little frankness was all that was needed."

John nodded gravely.

"Yes," he said, "just a little frankness."

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"WHY," SAID MR. DURBROW TESTILY, "I'D SAY: 'LOOK HERE, MY DEAR, AREN'T YOU FLIRTING A BIT?'"

caught her. John held her tightly in his arms.

"You will, will you?" he said roughly.

Mabel struggled to free herself.

"I'm going home," she said passionately.

"You're going to bed," said John Palmer fiercely.

For perhaps a second Mabel lay relaxed in his arms, and then she fought like a mad thing. John's arms tightened around her slim body.

She tried to kick. But John held her too tightly. She tried to scratch. But John Palmer walked up the stairs with her as if she had been a child. As he reached the door of her room she made one last effort. John Palmer merely held her tighter, his fingers pressing into her soft flesh like iron bands. Mabel turned like a cat and bit the thick part of his hand until the blood ran.

John Palmer was a big, powerful man, slow to anger. He had been brought up to take the protective atti-

to think. He could only press the memory of that horrible ten minutes out of his mind, that ten minutes that had stripped him of all his training, and revealed him as he was—an animal, a cruel, violent, vengeful animal, without pity, without chivalry, without decency.

John Palmer sneaked out of his house on tiptoe, lest some one should see him. He could not bear to face the parlor maid. He could only run away and hide.

He would walk. He would walk for miles across country. He would get a train somewhere and go away, forever.

IV.

MABEL awoke at 9 o'clock. She awoke refreshed. She awoke with some mysterious and secret sense of happiness.

For the moment she only knew that she was happy. And then she remembered.

Mabel lay very still while she re-

NEXT SATURDAY'S COMPLETE STORY

WEDDING CAKE

By SOPHIE KERR

Illustrated by WILL B. JOHNSTONE

A Woman's Deception That Gave Distinction to a Party and Helped a Second Love Affair

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